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AUTHOR Riley, Margaret E.
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ABSTRACT

Teachers teach literature to help students expand and develop their image-making powers, "to imagine, conceive, fancy, picture," to think. To get students involved in literature, especially poetry, Robert Frost's poem, "The Witch of Coos," is particularly useful because it is so immediately accessible. In order to help engage students with what they read before they read it, a teacher can have them experience imagery and metaphorical language to establish a connection between themselves and literature. This technique is achieved by having students imagine an image from the poem, before reading the poem, and then later having them compare it with the image that Frost relates. After discussion and listening to a recording of the poem the students write a more formal paper, one in which they examine a particular facet of the poem in more detail. This process can help students see how a poet, and how they themselves, can articulate emotion through imagery, can transform emotion to imagery and therefore to thought. The results are that (1) by studying imagery students develop their own abilities to create and recreate images in their minds; (2) by the intellectual rigor studying poetry demands, students exercise and develop those image-making capabilities; and (3) by studying metaphor and figurative language, students develop the ability to "form connected ideas," a notion integral to the thinking process: to see relationships and, perhaps more importantly, to see where those relationships break down; and (4) by articulating emotion through imagery, students become aware of and begin to understand the role emotion plays in the thinking process. (MS)

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Imagery: Thinking With the Mind's Eye

by Margaret E. Riley
Chabot College/Valley Campus
Livermore, California

John Ciardi, in his book How Does A Poem Mean?, suggests a simple experiment to show that "thoughts are made of pictures." Pause, he says, make an effort to clear your mind, and then "'think' some central experience as 'Home for Christmas.' Instantly many 'thoughts' flash through one's mind. And clearly those thoughts are not words but 'pictures' (and recollections of other sensory impressions such as sounds, smells, tastes)."[1] I tried this experiment in my introduction to literature class; I asked my students to close their eyes and watch carefully what happened in their minds when I repeated the words, "home for Christmas." I waited a few moments, then asked what happened. What did they see? hear? smell? The results astonished them: Christmas trees, the family, stockings; they could hear carols, bells, conversations; smell pine needles, turkeys roasting; taste homemade fudge. Some of them had poignant responses; some saw Christmases of years ago, others saw a recent Christmas. But no one saw the words "home for Christmas" passing across their minds like words on a ticker tape. I know that imagery is central to poetry, but I hadn't made the conscious connection between imagery and thought

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before. I had always considered thinking (if I thought about it at all) as the manipulation of abstract symbols, something that scientists and mathematicians did, not as the creation or recreation of concrete sensual images.

Intrigued by my students' responses to Ciardi's exercise, I looked up the definition of the verb "to think" in the Oxford English Dictionary. What I found surprised me. The definition reads, in part,

> to think: to conceive in the mind; to exercise the mind, esp, the understanding, in any active way; to form connected ideas of any kind; to form or have an idea of (a thing, action, or circumstance, real or imaginary, in one's mind; to imagine, conceive, fancy, picture.

Although experience tells us that thinking is not limited to imagery -- when we think we consciously or subconsciously incorporate mythical patterns, for example, or emotions, previous experiences, memory -- image-making is central to the thinking process.[2] So when we contemplate the question posed as one of the program topics for this conference, "Literature for What?" -- in other words, why teach literature? -- we find one answer in the definition of the verb "to think": we teach literature to help our students expand and develop their image-making powers, "to imagine, conceive, fancy, picture," to think.

This leads naturally to another question: how? Most of us got into the English business because we love to read, but what do we do with a generation of students whose minds are atrophied by passively receiving images from television and

movies rather than exercised (note the definition of "to think" includes "to exercise the mind") by actively creating and recreating images? What specifically can we do in the classroom to get the students involved in literature, especially poetry, which many of them tend to resist? Using Robert Frost's poem, "The Witch of Coos," I will describe a set of exercises I've used successfully in the classroom to engage the students in creating images (writing) and recreating images (reading) as a way of getting into poetry.

I begin my introduction to literature course with poetry, and I begin the study of poetry with Frost's "The Witch of Coos" because it's so immediately accessible. It's a narrative poem, telling of a man who "stayed the night for shelter" at the home of an old country woman and her 40-year old son, "two old believers." The old woman -- a witch -- and her son tell the stranger a story about a skeleton that haunts their house, where he came from, why he's there. We as readers are never sure whether to believe the witch or doubt her. The poem includes stuff that students find agreeable: mystery (who was the skeleton?), murder (the bones begin their travels through the house from "a grave down in the cellar"), the supernatural (the skeleton/ghost itself), "weird" people (the 40-year old son still at home with Mom), perhaps an illicit love affair (between the old woman and the man the bones once were), the occult (the witch).

Even so, some students are daunted by the fact that

they're expected to read real poetry, "great literature." Many of my community college students have had very little exposure to poetry, some none at all. They tend to think of literature as a world outside themselves, a world they don't inhabit. I needed to figure out a way to engage the students with what they read before they read it, to give them a stake in what they read, and to familiarize them with two great delights in reading: delight in recognizing something familiar, and delight in discovering something new.

What I came up with might seem at first like a classic example of putting the cart before the horse. My idea was to have them write about a poem before they read it, to have them experience for themselves some of the creative energy that goes into poetry, to have them experience imagery and -- yes -- metaphorical language themselves before seeing how a poet uses them, thereby grounding their experience of learning something new into their own pre-existing knowledge and experience.[3] In other words, I wanted my students to establish a connection between themselves and literature.

Before they read Frost's poem, then, I ask my students to imagine, to "think," a skeleton in their minds. What does the skeleton look like? Feel like? Smell like? Sound like? How would it look if it moved? I allow them a few minutes to create an image of the skeleton in their minds, then ask them to spend about ten minutes describing that skeleton in a paragraph, trying to be as detailed as possible. The

students then share their paragraphs in groups of three or four (larger groups would take up too much time). Each group chooses one paragraph to read aloud to the class. Then, as a class, we talk about each chosen paragraph: what did the writer do to create the image? What kinds of words did he or she use? Colors? Sizes? Shapes? Sounds? Did the writer use figurative language? (Quite often the students will use figurative language without realizing it. Searching for words to create the description, students consciously or unconsciously compare the skeleton to something else. One student described her image of the skeleton as moving "like a puppet on a string, its feet not quite touching the floor," and another compared his skeleton's rib cage to "a bird cage without the bird.")

Here the students are discussing and examining their own writing and that of their peers, and it's exciting for them. They realize their own writing has validity and creativity, that it's worthy of discussion and examination. Their minds "imagine, conceive, fancy, picture." As writers and thinkers they create unique images (no two descriptions will be the same even though the students all describe the same thing, a skeleton). The students are also willing -- even eager -- to share their writing, to discuss how they came up with their images, what was going on in their minds. "Could you see it?" I ask. They nod, eyes shining. For many of them it's a revelation. They did not see the word s-k-e-l-e-t-o-n in

their heads; they saw the image, a picture, of a skeleton.

"Well," I say, "this is part of what a poet does. He creates an image in his mind, then using exactly the same techniques you did, he tries to recreate that image on paper, in his poem, so you as readers can see what he sees. And, perhaps, when you see what he sees you will feel what he feels. Then you will have experienced what a poem 'means'."

I also point out that their eagerness to share their writing corresponds to a poet's eagerness to share his. A poem doesn't exist in a vacuum; it is created to be read. The energy, discipline, and excitement that a poet puts into his poem must be matched by its reader. Like writing a poem, reading a poem is not easy, but it is rewarding and exhilarating.

So far the students haven't read Frost's poem, but they have been introduced to it. Now I assign "The Witch of Coos" as the reading assignment for the next class meeting, asking the students to note carefully how Frost describes his skeleton and how their descriptons are similar to or different from his. At the next class session, I ask the students first to share their experience of reading the poem and of comparing Frost's descriptions with their own. If it doesn't come up in the discussion (and it usually does), I point out that many students used similes to help create their image of a skeleton: "like a puppet," "like a birdcage." So does Frost: "[It] carried itself like a pile

of dishes"; "I had a vision of them put together/Not like a man but like a chandelier"; ". . . it looked like lightning or a scribble." We'll get to the more subtle metaphors later. For now, the students are discovering how they bring their own experiences and memories and their own experimentation with figurative language to their reading. They're discovering that the connection between themselves and literature is common human experience.

Then I play a recording of Frost reading his poem and have the students mark passages which seem especially vivid to them after hearing it, but this time I ask them to look for images other than visual images: images of sound, sensation; images that arouse emotion (passages of the poem that are scary or funny).[4] As soon as the recording is over, the students write a brief (ten-minute) response to the image that struck them most particularly, then share these responses in groups as they had done their descriptions. This exercise introduces them to more delights of reading: swapping favorite parts of the story and sharing a common experience. Each group chooses a person to read his or her paragraph aloud to the class. As before, the students' responses determine the class discussion. Hearing the poem (the sound an echo to the sense) adds another dimension to its reading, and the discussion can be wide-ranging indeed. We can talk about blank verse and the rhythm of poetry (students will ask why this is a poem if it doesn't rhyme),

onomatopoeia ("the faintest restless rustling ran all through them"), repetition ("brushing their chalky skull with chalky fingers"), more subtle metaphors (do the images of snow and coldness suggest something about the marriage the old woman and her husband endured?).

The "Witch of Coos" is incredibly rich in poetic language and techniques. We could spend weeks on it -- had we but world enough and time. But even with discussion limited to two class sessions, the poem serves excellently to introduce reading and writing about poetry.

The next step is to have the students write a more formal paper, one in which they examine a particular facet of the poem in more detail. At the end of this second class session, after we've heard and discussed the poem, I ask the students what kinds of questions they have. We brainstorm a bit, while I write their questions on the board: What kind of a marriage was it? Who were the bones? What kind of person is the son? Can we believe the mother? Is she really a witch? Why all the images of cold and snow? Who is the narrator? Then, for their more formal writing assignment, I ask the students to consider one of these questions, questions that they've generated themselves, using evidence from the poem to support their response. When the students leave to write their papers, they do not leave empty-handed. They have two paragraphs they've written themselves in class, they have a marked-up copy of the poem to look at, they're

alert to imagery and how it is used in the poem to evoke emotions, they've had feedback on their own writing, they've shared the experience of reading the poem with peers and can discuss the poem and their ideas about it outside of class if they wish. And not least, their shared experience of the poem has pulled the class together as a community of scholars, cogitating, wondering, discussing, arguing: was there really a skeleton or wasn't there?

This sequence, writing about a poem before it's read, then reading the poem, then listening to the poem read aloud and discussing particular images from the poem in class, and finally writing a more formal paper, is effective with poems more complex and difficult than "The Witch of Coos." For example, before my students read Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," I ask them to write a paragraph in response to the following: Suppose you and someone you love very much are going to be separated for a while. What would your feelings be? What would you say to your loved one? Can you think of any images -- pictures -- to show your loved one how you feel about him or her and about the separation?

The students' success with Frost has given them a way into poetry and a way into the powers of their own minds to create and recreate images. They might still be nervous, but they're not as intimidated as they were at first. They realize that they are indeed capable of thinking with their mind's eye. As they did with the Frost poem, they create

their own images, this time of the abstract ideas of love and separation. Doing so gives them a way into Donne's poem and can lead to a lively discussion of his central metaphor: the compass. I've had great success having one student read the "Valediction" aloud while another manipulates a drawing compass to recreate graphically Donne's images.

"We still ask boys in college to think, as in the nineties," said Robert Frost, "but we seldom tell them what thinking means; we seldom tell them it is just putting this and that together; it is saying one thing in terms of another. To tell them is to set their feet on the first rung of a ladder the top of which sticks through the sky."[5] When I asked my students to "think" "home for Christmas," they first had to put two complex notions together: "home" and "Christmas." Connecting these two abstract ideas resulted in sensory imagery, imagery that would have been different if I had said "home for Easter" or "a trip at Christmas." After forming these connected ideas, more connections happened, each student drawing on his or her own memories, perceptions, relationships.

Reading and writing about Frost's "Witch of Coos," the students experienced bringing their memories and perceptions to reading using a concrete notion: a skeleton. A poem like Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" allows the students to see how a poet, and how they themselves, can articulate emotion through imagery, can transform emotion to

imagery and therefore to thought. So, as teachers of literature, we are helping our students to develop their thinking abilities in a number of ways:

1. by studying imagery students develop their own abilities to create and recreate images in their minds;
2. by the intellectual rigor studying poetry demands, students exercise and develop those image-making capabilities;
3. by studying metaphor and figurative language, students develop the ability to "form connected ideas," a notion integral to the thinking process: to see relationships and, perhaps more importantly, to see where those relationships break down;
4. by articulating emotion through imagery, students become aware of and begin to understand the role emotion plays in the thinking process, how it can be useful and how it must be understood to be used most effectively.

If there were a simple verb form incorporating all aspects of the study of literature, "to literature," say, the OED definition of "to think" with its emphasis on imagery, metaphor, picturing, would fit precisely. I don't know who coined the trendy redundancy, "critical thinking," but I do know that as English teachers our aim all along has been to stimulate our students to develop their own innate image-

making powers through reading and writing. The ability to create and recreate imagery is the ability to think, to think with the mind's eye.

Notes and Sources

[1] John Ciardi, How Does a Poem Mean? (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959) 864.

[2] George Lakoff, preface, Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987).

Lakoff summarizes his argument in the Preface, challenging the traditional, Aristotelian view that "reason is abstract and disembodied," the mechanical manipulation of abstract symbols by a mind that is an abstract machine, like a computer, and argues that recent research suggests a new view: that "Thought is embodied . . . that conceptual systems grow out of bodily experience," and that "Thought is imaginative, in that those concepts which are not directly grounded in experience employ metaphor, metonymy, and mental imagery" (p. xiv).

What all this boils down to is that the "imaginative aspects of reason, -- metaphor, metonomy, and mental imagery [are] central to reason, rather than . . . a periperhal and inconsequential adjunct to the literal" (p. xi). Teaching literature, then, with its emphasis on figurative language, goes beyond the ideas of enculturation, of traditional didacticism (Sidney's "teach and delight") which includes moral instruction and increased understanding of human nature, to the very core, the seed, of the thinking process itself.

[3] Kevin McKean, "Memory," Discover November 1983: 24. This article reports on research linking memory and the learning process.

[4] Robert Frost, "The Witch of Coos," Robert Frost Reads His Poetry, Caedmon, 61-7521, 1956. This audiotape is conveniently available through the Book-of-the-Month Club, Camp Hill, PA 17012.

[5] -----, "Education by Poetry: A Meditative Monologue," The Norton Reader, ed. Arthur M. Eastman et al, 6th ed. (New York: Norton, 1984) 1025.

That this piece was originally a talk given to Amherst College in 1930 reinforces my point that poets historically have had a jump on cognitive scientists who are just now discovering the link between imagery and thinking. There is also food for thought in the fact that computers are unable to "think" metaphorically.